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Cost-Benefit Analysis: A Conservation Caveat

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Opposition to large-scale industrial projects in wilderness areas is often portrayed as elitist - a move by the *haves* (urban environmentalists) to deny employment and recreational opportunities to the *have-nots* (the unemployed, labourers, locals). Such accusations have plagued the conservation movement throughout its short history and can be explained, in part, by the privileged backgrounds of nature advocates generally: people who take advantage of remote wilderness tend to be better- educated, better-employed and better-heeled than most (Nash, pp. 373, 60, 364). More significantly, however, charges of elitism signal the unease and even outrage of those forced to defend a dear and unquestioned belief. Conservation - particularly the virulent preservationist variety of conservation - is threatening. It is perceived by many to undermine one of the axiomatic pillars of the industrial story: 2. that resources should be allocated and used so as to maximize the net benefits to society..3.

Despite such perceptions, many conservationists are far from rejecting this maximization imperative. In fact, it has become a *sine qua non* of resourcist arguments. The task - never an easy one - is to demonstrate that protection can rival development, even in terms of utility. The hope, for conservation, is that in resorting to cost/benefit analyses, it will be possible to draw attention both to the "external costs" of development and to societal preferences which "often do not have any readily available market expression" (Pearce and Turner, p. 321). It is an attempt to compensate for the fact that ordinarily, development benefits are the subject of well-defined monetary estimates, whereas conservation benefits are not (Ibid., p. 313).

The strength of the argument hinges on the interpretation given to *utility*. This concept, which derives its authority from economics, refers to the satisfaction of human desires or preferences. Maximizing utility means achieving the greatest possible human benefit from a given resource. For proponents of industry, utility can only be maximized in wilderness areas if these are opened up to both industrial (mining, logging) and recreational development. A fundamental assumption is that more use is better than less: more use means more benefit to more people. For instance, if industrial development necessitates road building, so much the better. Since lack of access is a major limiting factor to recreational use of wilderness areas, it follows that utility would be enhanced if more roads were built.

Conservationists counter, however, that wilderness preservation can accommodate a

wider range of preferences. For one thing, those recreationists (the majority) who require roads, hotels and RV hook-ups are well provided for elsewhere and should not begrudge wilderness lovers their corner of paradise (Nash, p. 205). Equally important, preservation takes into account the preferences of those who appreciate wilderness vicariously for its non-use "option," "bequest" and "existence" values..4. From this perspective, it would seem that elitism more properly characterizes the narrow, self-serving projects of industrialists than the broader aims of conservationists: "The profit-seeking motives of a few," we maintain, must not be allowed to jeopardize "an irreplaceable international public resource" (National Wildlife Federation).

One of the difficulties facing decision-makers of course is to compare such disparate interests. Economists suggest that monetary valuation can and should be used to measure and weigh utility. Money is the "measuring rod" of choice, not because in itself it is necessarily desirable, but because "all of us express our preferences every day in terms of these units" (Pearce and Turner, pp. 10, 121). Money is an obvious common denominator. It is a readily available metaphor for value, which in turn is a function of utility yielded.

Misunderstandings can and do arise though when money as a unit of measurement is confused with profit - money in pocket. Such confusion tends to work to the advantage of industry which is able to base its benefit estimates on economic tangibles like employment opportunities, tax revenues and corporate profits. Industrial development results in a considerable flow of hard cash. In contrast, no such literal interpretation can be given to the estimated worth of preservation, and as a consequence, in the eyes of many it loses its appeal. For example, with regard to efforts to protect British Columbia's Tatshenshini River from mining development critics asked: "How useful is a wilderness that is locked in snow and ice for most of the year?"; "Can wilderness recreation ever generate sufficient economic activity, considering the short season and limits on numbers, to offset the potential economic benefits of the mine proposal?" (B.C. Environmental Information Institute).

Faced with such daunting questions, conservationists have little choice but to respond in kind. Because the debate is framed in terms of *economic utility*, it becomes a *strategic* necessity for conservationists to adopt cost/benefit arguments. Accordingly, wilderness is recast as resource in order to legitimize its existence and to allow decision-makers to weigh its value against that of other resources (eg. minerals, trees). An area's wildlife, vegetation and geological features, its interest to science, the culture and history of its first human inhabitants, the wilderness experience - all are explained in terms of the "uses" made and "benefits" arising to society.

Of course there is a calculated risk in consenting to an economic framework for discussion. Favourable results are not guaranteed. Yet even more disturbing, in my opinion, are the expectations engendered by engaging in economic reasoning. By adhering to the same mode of valuation as industry, conservationists implicitly, though perhaps unwittingly, encourage dollar-for-dollar, job-for-job comparisons. Through our use of economic metaphors we create the impression that nature protection can be not only profitable, but that it should compensate economically for foregone development opportunities. In referring to wilderness as both "resource" and "asset" we seem to invite comments like the following:

If I were the British Columbia finance minister, I might want to figure out how to tax grizzly bears. It will be tough to get any other kind of revenue from the wilderness through which the great Tatshenshini River flows in the most northerly corner of British Columbia (Schreiner).

Language forces us into its patterns. Monetary valuation is the language of exploitation and trade-offs. To adopt that language with the intention of countering the very values

that it embodies - profit maximization, economic growth, the human domination of nature - seems problematic at best. It makes no sense really since the story itself excludes the possibility that value might mean something other than human preference or that human activity might be "motivated by factors other than maximizing utility." .5.

Neil Evernden calls *resourcism* the "Trojan horse of the industrial state" (p. 24). While this remark might bring to mind the tactical risks outlined in the preceding analysis, Evernden is alluding in fact to something far more insidious than the pitfalls of strategic planning. He is drawing our attention to the dangers, treacheries, lies and compromises inherent in a particular world-view. He is calling on us to reconsider the meaning of our engagement. Simply put, if we as conservationists do not regard wildflowers as resources, if we are not motivated by the desire to maximize their utility, if we do not equate their value with human preference, then in good faith, we must reject the prevailing story.

Notes

1. This paper has been taken and adapted from Bell, Anne, *Conservation Stories: Protecting the Tatshenshini*, a Major Paper submitted to the Faculty of Environmental Studies, York University, 1993.
2. By "story" I mean the cultural narratives which shape our beliefs and experience. See Haraway.
3. The meaning of both conservation and preservation is contested. They are often taken to be antithetical terms, *conservation* having resourcist/utilitarian connotations and *preservation* reflecting a less compromising, "for nature's sake" approach to protecting the non-human world. Usage of the words is in fact far more complex, and while acknowledging the importance of the debate (it is central to my Major Paper from which this essay was taken) it is not my intent to delve into the matter here. Suffice to say that here I use *conservation* in a general sense to include both utilitarian and ecocentric approaches, and *preservation* in a more specific sense to refer to the establishment of protected areas.
4. "Option value" expresses a preference to preserve wilderness in order to keep future options open; "bequest value" expresses a preference to preserve wilderness for future generations; "existence value" expresses the satisfaction we gain from knowing that wilderness exists.
5. See Pearce and Turner, p. 136; see also p. 121: "Because money valuation relates back to individual preferences, it does however follow that any rejection of preference as the proper basis for decisions about the environment will entail rejection of the use of money values, or economic values as we shall call them." The other bases suggested (but ignored) include duty, love and justice.

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